



Google's free for all

As the internet's favourite company moves into instant messaging and VoIP, Paul Trotter wonders whether we are witnessing a sinister and tyrannical expansion or a bright new dawn in communications

Why would any right-minded individual want a product they knew didn't measure up to the majority of tools that are available, for free, to anyone who wants them? The answer is, they wouldn't. Not unless they were a sucker for a brand. Google has made the next step in its bid for world domination, and many of us have already bought into the hype.

The new service is called Google Talk and it has the basics you would expect of an instant messaging (IM) and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) client, but not much more. There's no video chat, no file sharing and, most surprisingly of all for a Google product, no search facility. So why would anyone bother with it?

INVITATION ONLY

Just as we felt part of the in-crowd when we were first invited to sign up for a Gmail address, some of us now feel we're part of something big because we've got Google Talk on our desktops. The new application is a basic web chat and internet telephony tool that only users of Google's web-based email service can access. The temptation to find out just what the darling of the web is up to next is too much to resist.

Google is a master of marketing. When Gmail first launched, there was a gold rush for gmail.com email addresses. They were even sold on eBay as suckers bought in to the perception that having an email address set up by the most talked-about tech brand of the moment gave us bragging rights. It didn't matter that we already had Yahoo! and Hotmail accounts. Gmail was prestigious because only a select few of us were 'invited'.

Most of those accounts probably sit idle, accessed only occasionally by those who fear their subscription might lapse if they don't sign in once a month. So why do we do this? Because Google is a company that's going places.

BRAND OF BROTHERS

In an era when we're no longer wowed by the promises of the internet, Google stands alone as the web brand with the potential to outgrow all others. If you really believe the hype, that even includes Microsoft. As well as the world's most popular search engine and Gmail, the company's founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page have given us a price comparison tool for shopping online, a satellite map that provides an aerial view of our

homes and now an instant messaging and VoIP service.

Barely a month goes by without another Google innovation or a rumour of a possible launch by the company that was founded just seven years ago on the maxim 'Don't be evil'. The company's

in the 1990s, but the shareholders who made Google the biggest tech IPO for years in 2004 will not be so philanthropic. They want Google to dominate as many markets as it can, to ensure that customers use the company's products for a variety of applications and to create an environment in

which Google fever reaches such a pitch that they can cash in all those shares. The company's modern day maxim is 'Organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful'. With this suitably broad remit, Google could enter just about any sector of the IT market and still be on course to achieve its goal.

But analysts are asking if we should see Google's growth as a good thing for our computing lives, or as a dangerous expansion that's creating a company worthy of as much cynical consideration as Microsoft. Although Google has undoubtedly succeeded in building goodwill among millions of internet users, the company now needs to make money out of us.

While Gmail users see adverts that are relevant to the content of the messages in their inbox, Google Talk does not appear to offer a revenue-generating mechanism. Advertising is central to Google's business model. In just about everything the company has offered so far, Google has made sure that, for the basic level of service at least, the end user does not have to pay anything.

TALK IS CHEAP

So could the long-term significance of Google's entry to the VoIP market be free phone calls for all? Initially the service is open only to Gmail users, but if Google Talk is convincing enough to encourage more people to sign up and

use it, there could be economies of scale to support talk time paid for by advertisers.

VoIP operator Skype, with its cheap phone calls, has become the new best friend of many web users. Just imagine the interest that would be generated by a completely free VoIP service that allows people to call landlines and mobiles as well as other PCs.

While Google Talk is unlikely to woo VoIP users at first, the company could have something up its sleeve that will attract not just those who already talk over the net, but the technophobes too. Free calls for everyone would dramatically reshape not just the web but the telecommunications market as a whole. Most people would forgo the bells and whistles for that. **CS**



Google Talk has no video chat, no file sharing and, most surprisingly of all for a Google product, no search facility. So why would anyone bother with it?

standing in the IT world hasn't been harmed at all by the fact that Microsoft continually mentions it as a potential threat to its business, either.

One advantage Google has over its Redmond-based rival is its ability to work fast. Microsoft appears to spend most of its time plugging holes, putting out patches and delaying new products; Google launches a new category of product every few months. And the fact that most of its products are free to the end user means there's little opportunity for discontent among its customers.

BLACK MARKET

University students Brin and Page could afford to be idealistic when they penned that 'Don't be evil' line